

Derek Wallbank, *MinnPost*

WASHINGTON - Tuesday's state aid vote in the House was another feather in the cap of Democrats, who lauded \$26 billion in state aid for teachers and Medicaid, and another shot of ammunition for Republicans, who once again accused their counterparts of voting for a bailout.

Minnesota's share of that is an additional \$263 million in Medicaid funding for Minnesota, and about \$167 million for education funding that is estimated will create or save some 2,800 jobs.

The state's delegation split entirely along party lines on the measure, which wound up being approved on a 247-161 vote. President Obama signed it into law less than three hours later.

"It was a good piece of legislation," said Rep. Tim Walz, who wondered aloud at why it took months of consideration and leaders recalling the House from recess as he literally ran to make an early afternoon flight back to Minnesota. "I'm glad we did it," Rep. Betty McCollum agreed, saying she'd been told at town halls that the teacher funding was critical.

The measure was a little more than half the size of one that cleared the House earlier this year, but it had to be slashed almost in half to circumvent a Republican filibuster attempt.

"It's not an ideal bill," said Rep. Keith Ellison, who said he would have rather kept money for food stamps money that was cut in the Senate. "Basically, we're going to have teachers in the classroom but we might have hungry kids sitting in front of them."

In the end, he was for it as well, as was Rep. Collin Peterson who decided to back the bill only hours before the final vote.

"It's going to reduce the deficit by \$1.3 billion," Peterson said as he revealed his decision to *MinnPost* just after noon (the final vote was around 3 p.m. eastern time). "Taking the food stamp money which I thought was probably unnecessary anyway and using it for [Medicaid funding] - which the governor of Minnesota was already counting on anyway - probably makes more sense."

To be clear, Gov. Tim Pawlenty's original budget presentation counted on \$387 million in what's known as Federal Medicaid Assistance Percentages (FMAP) funding, but the state's budget was eventually balanced without it. Should Pawlenty accept this money, it would go to the state's bottom line, officials said.

Republicans blast spending

In a statement, Pawlenty didn't seem pleased to be offered the money he was once counting on.

"The federal government should not deficit spend to bail out states and special interest groups," the governor said. "Minnesota balanced its budget without raising taxes and without relying on more federal money. The federal government's reckless spending spree must come to an end."

Rep. John Kline, ranking member on the Education and Labor Committee, called it a "bailout" for states that keeps teacher employment at artificially high levels states won't be able to fund later without requiring any reforms.

"Schools will continue to operate on 'last hired, first fired' policies that ignore student achievement when deciding which teachers to keep in the classroom," Kline said. "These dollars are not targeted based on jobs at risk or student needs - this is nothing more than an across-the-board inflation of state spending."

Americans for Limited Government, meanwhile, said lawmakers like Peterson and Walz (who were targeted in insert-name-here press releases) "voted to waste billions of dollars just to forestall the day of reckoning for bankrupt states, which really do need to cut spending."

On to November

On this point, Republicans and Democrats agreed: This wasn't just a disagreement on policy

between the two parties, this represented one group standing up for what's right while the other one took a cynical vote that's little more than partisan electioneering.

Of course, who was standing up for truth, justice and the American way and who was doing the electioneering, well, that was in the eye of the beholder.

When a reporter described this as a state aid bill, Rep. Michele Bachmann replied that it's "actually the 'Cash for Democrat Reelection Program,'" a "travesty" and an "outrage."

"It's money from the taxpayers to go through to the public employee unions, who skim off the top [of public employee salaries] and use the money to fund these reelection programs." Now that public unions are appeased, she said, they'll "get off the couch" and go to work for the Dems that supported it.

White House spokesman Bill Burton called comments like Bachmann's an "awfully cynical take on what we're doing."

"Teachers are being laid off because states are in economic crises. And what the President is doing here is everything that he can to make sure that teachers stay in these classrooms, that firefighters and cops stay on the streets, and that our economy keeps growing"

"I would urge you not to think that this is by any means anything other than exactly what it is."

Of course, the fire came quick and hot from the left side of the aisle as well, but Democrats didn't say Republicans were electioneering, rather that their opposition was a window into their deeply-held beliefs.

"I just think their vision of America is in sharp contrast to what average Americans want," Ellison said.

"The economy's still in recovery, and when a patient's in recovery you don't pull the plug," McCollum said, "The Republicans want to pull the plug on America."